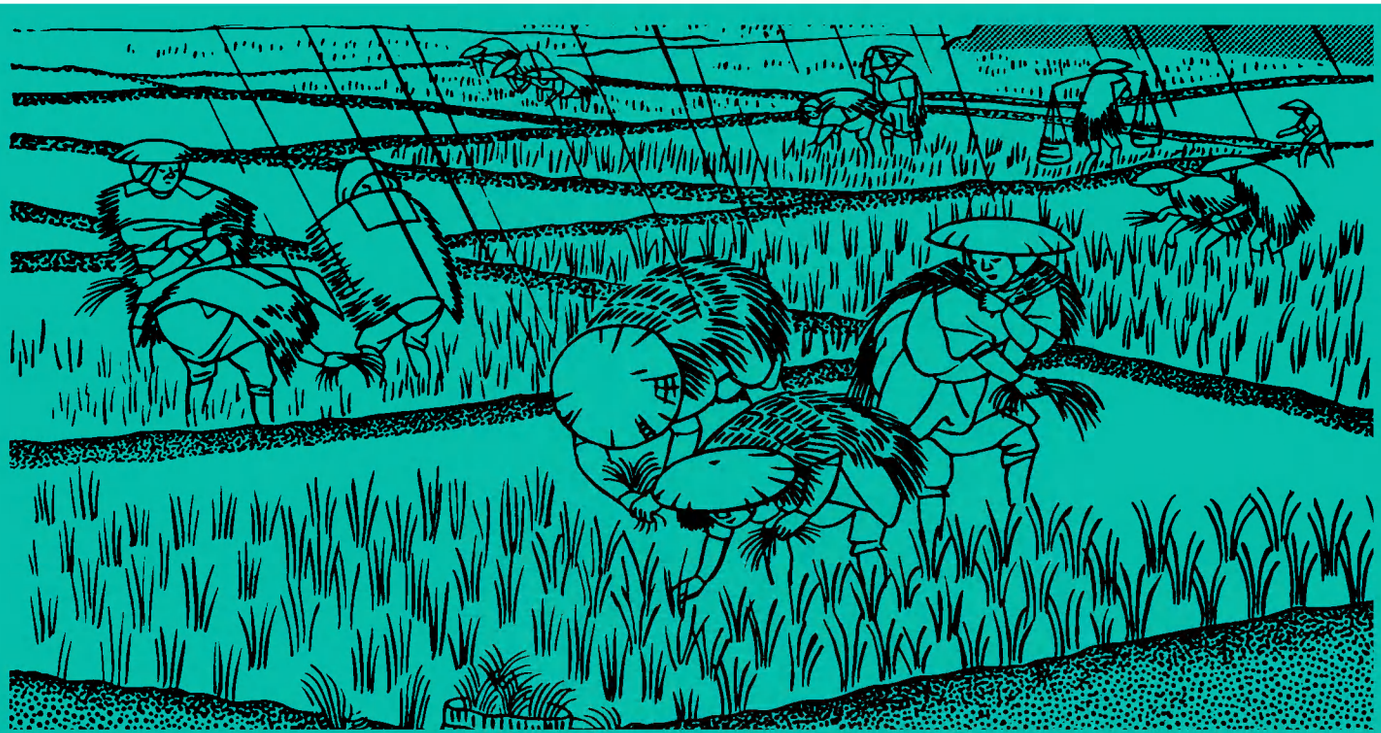
THEY LIVED LIKE THIS IN OLD JAPAN

Marie Neurath & Evelyn Worboys



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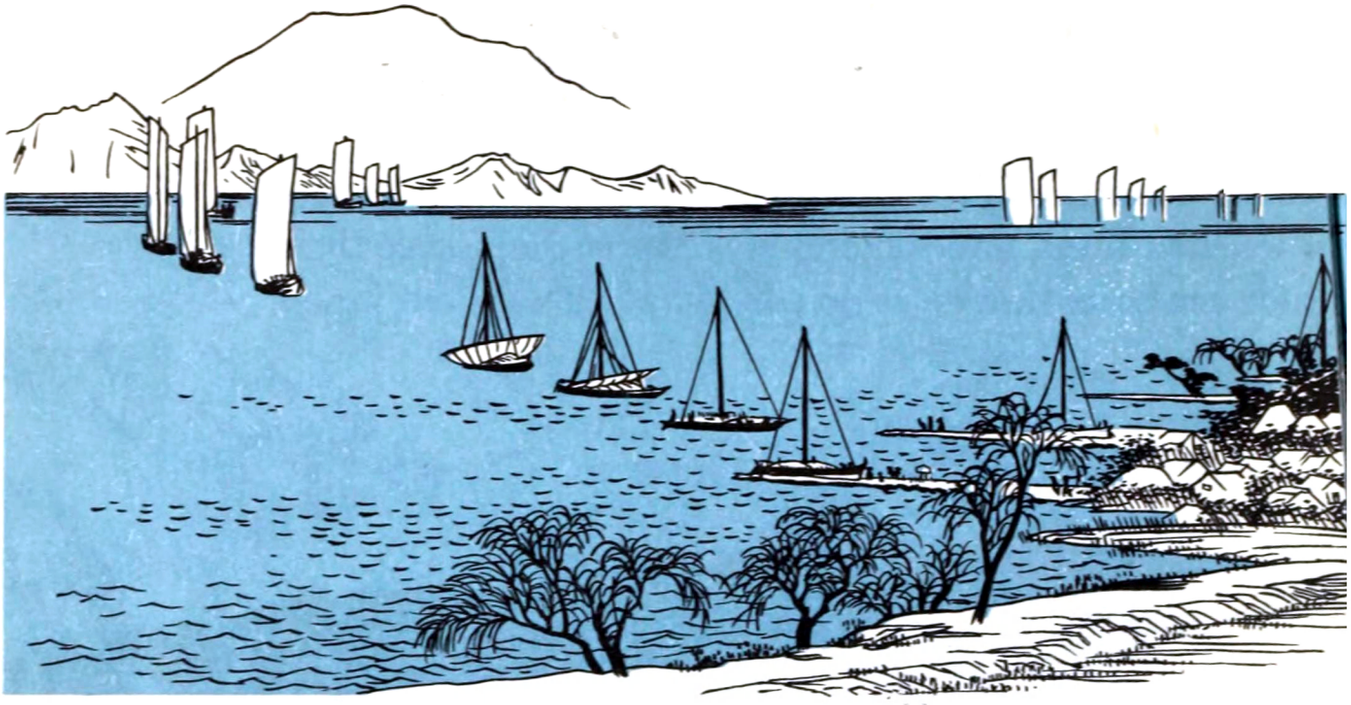
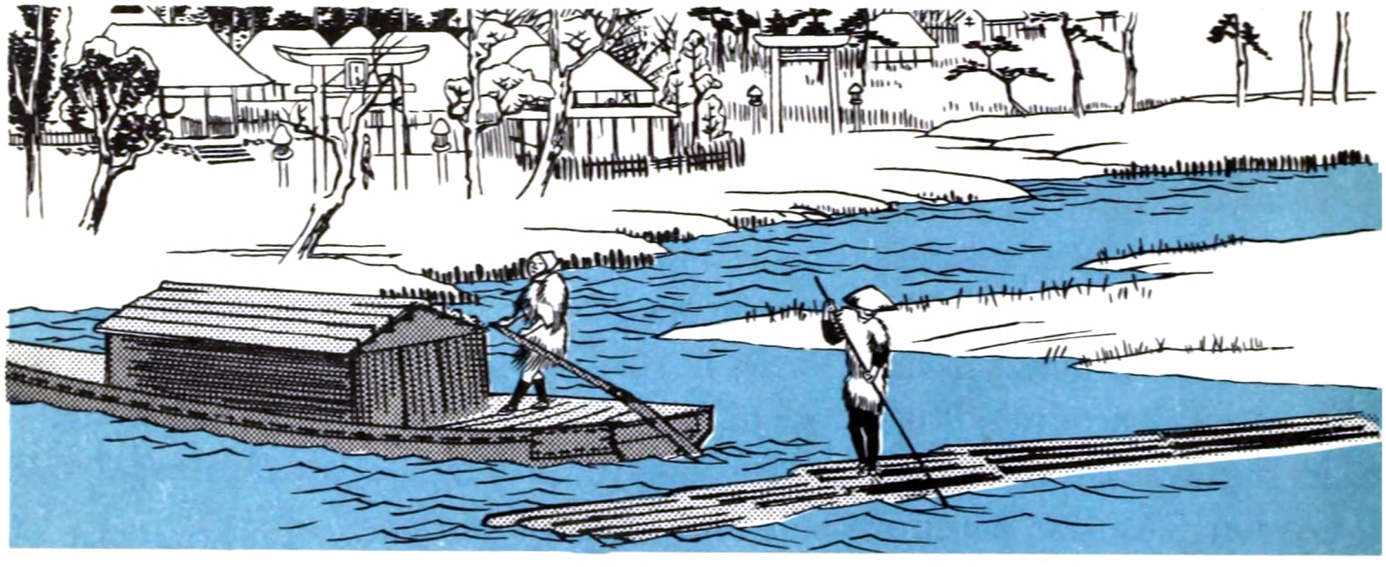
OLD JAPAN

In many countries of the world today Japanese goods are used. We can see their films, and sometimes we meet the people themselves. But for centuries there was no contact at all with old Japan.

Japan is a group of mountainous islands off the shores of East Asia. It has frequent earthquakes and many volcanoes. The highest is snow-capped Mount Fuji, which is famous for its beauty. In fine weather it can be seen for 100 miles around. This is one of the many pictures artists have made of it. Fuji was an active volcano through most of old Japan's history. Now it is quiet. The last eruption was almost 300 years ago.

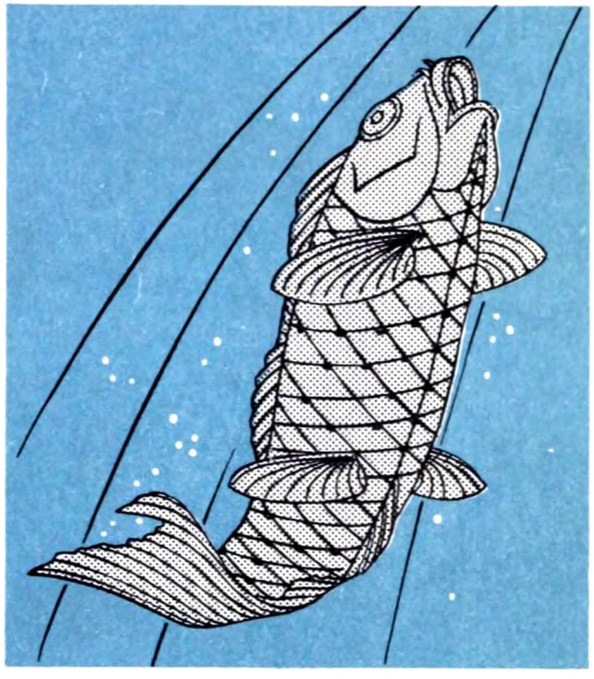


From olden times the Japanese have used ships to transport people and goods between the islands and along the coasts and rivers. Their boats had square sails. River boats were handled by men with oars, or punted with a pole.



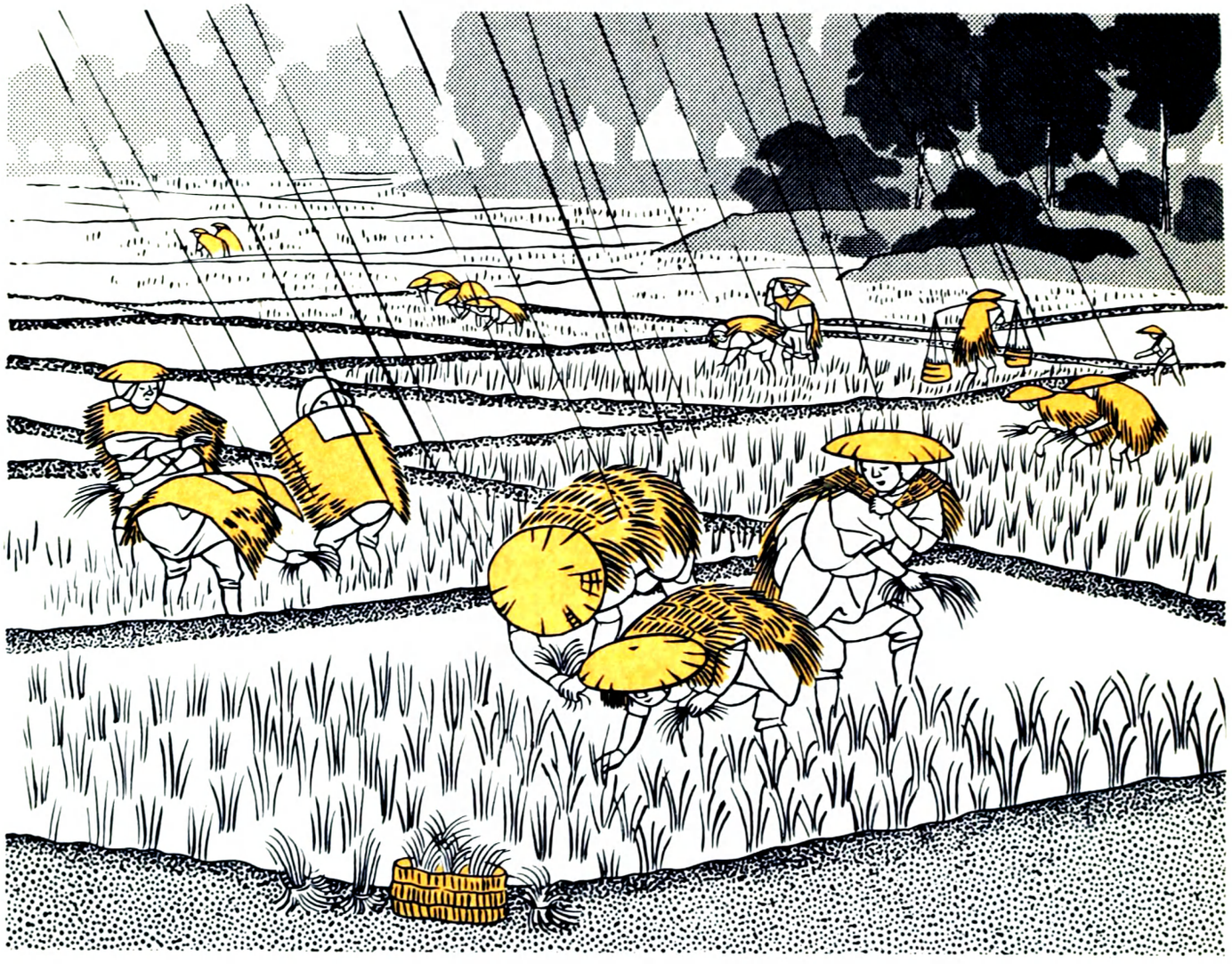
This picture shows fishermen at work with their nets.
For more than a thousand years the Japanese have
sailed and fished in the sea and the rivers.

They also bred carp
which they kept in ponds.



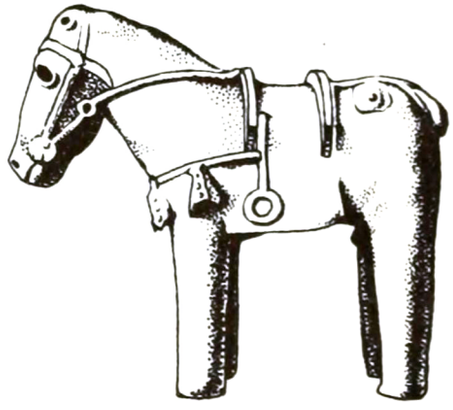
Even today their fishing grounds are
an important source of Japan's food.
The fields alone cannot feed its
many people, and crops may fail.

The main crop in Japan has always been rice. The Japanese grew it by the same method as the southern Chinese and may have learned it from them. Young rice needs water to grow in. A network of large and small earth dams is built near a river so that the flooding of the fields can be controlled. The rice is sown in a flooded field. Later the seedlings are transplated. The workers in this picture are protected against the rain by hats and coats made of straw.

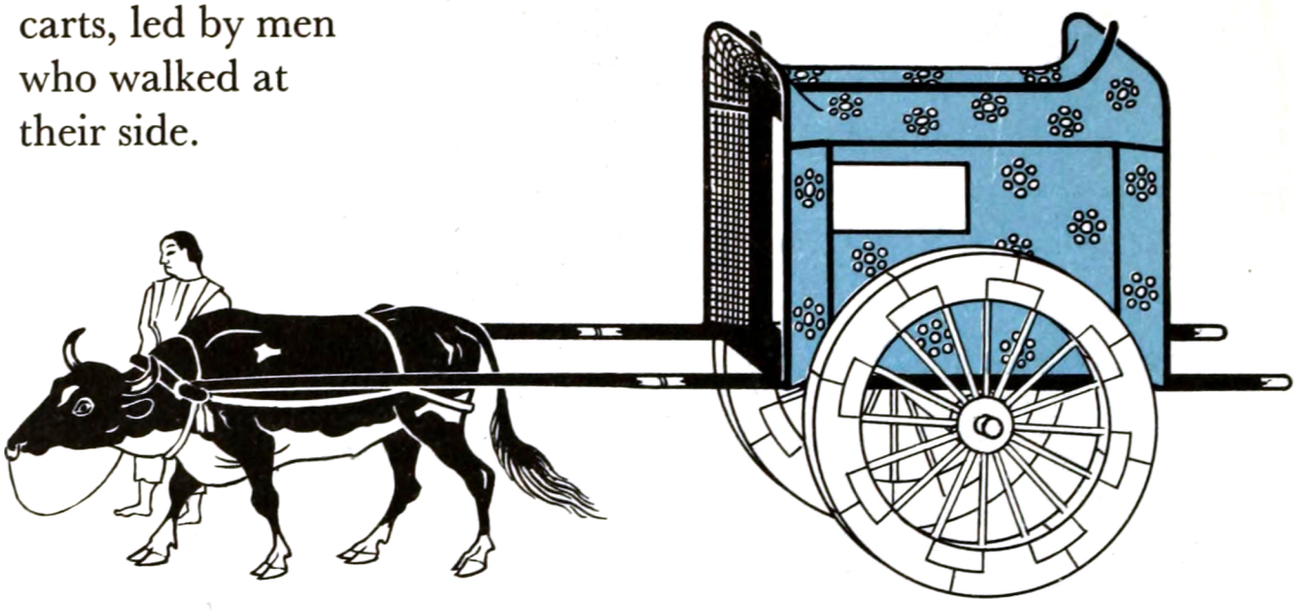


For a long time there were few real roads. This picture shows a man riding along a dam wall between the fields.

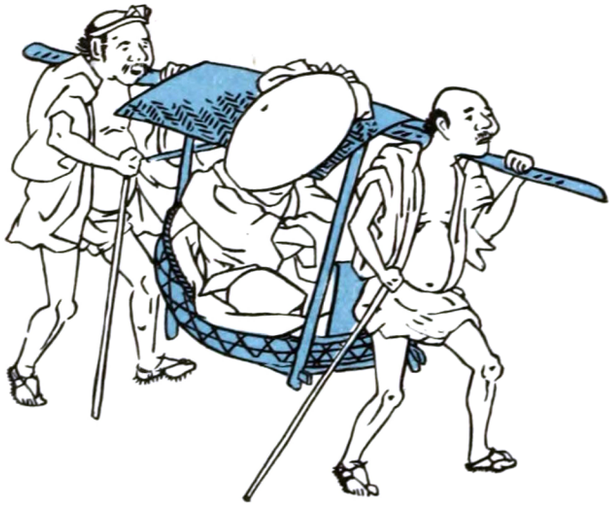
Horses were introduced to Japan from the mainland of Asia after the invention of stirrups. This model of a horse was found in the tomb of a nobleman who lived about 1,600 years ago. It has saddle and stirrups.



Horses were not harnessed to carts in early times. Oxen were used to draw carts, led by men who walked at their side.



The nobleman's carriage was richly decorated and had screens at the front and back.

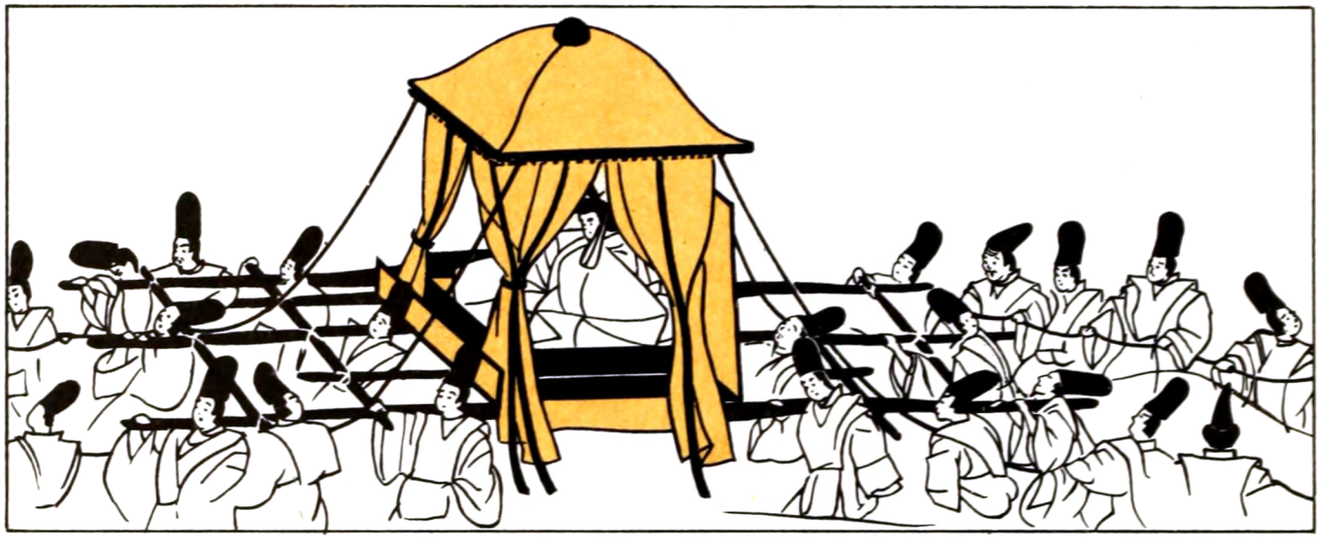


Other travellers were carried over rough ground and across rivers.

Here we see some men leading heavily laden oxen through rough weather.

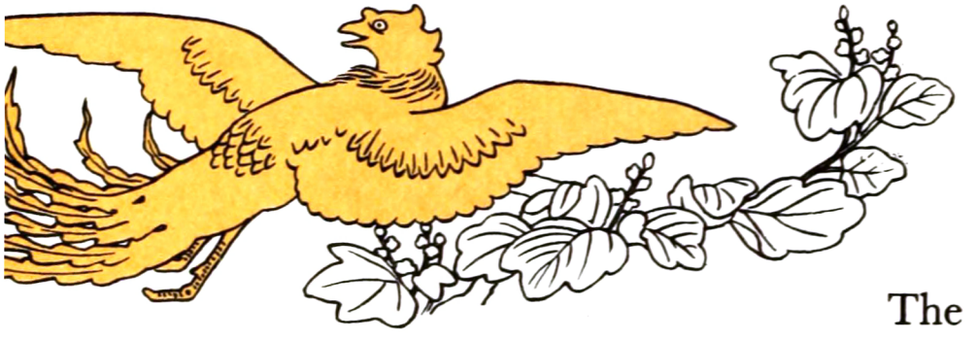
The country people tilled the fields, but they became very poor as they had to pay heavy taxes to support the court, the nobles, the warriors and the temples. Art was created for the pleasure of the upper classes. Japanese painting developed into a great art, but very few pictures show the peasants. We hardly know how they lived, what they enjoyed or feared.

Ranking above everyone else was the emperor, descendant of a single dynasty which ruled through the centuries. Japanese legends say that the first emperor was the grandson of the sun goddess who sent him to rule the land. He was revered and surrounded by ceremony.



Only the emperor and empress were carried like this, by many men.

The phoenix was the emperor's symbol.



The phoenix was said to alight only on this flowering plant which was used by the emperor as a crest.

The emperor was the only who could fulfil certain religious duties. The Japanese believed that their welfare was in danger when they came into contact with disease or death, and that the emperor could perform cleansing rites to protect them.
In early times, when the old emperor died the new emperor had to build himself a new palace and a new city.

His court consisted of nobles who owned much land. They ruled the country, competing with each other to gain the most important posts for men of their own family.

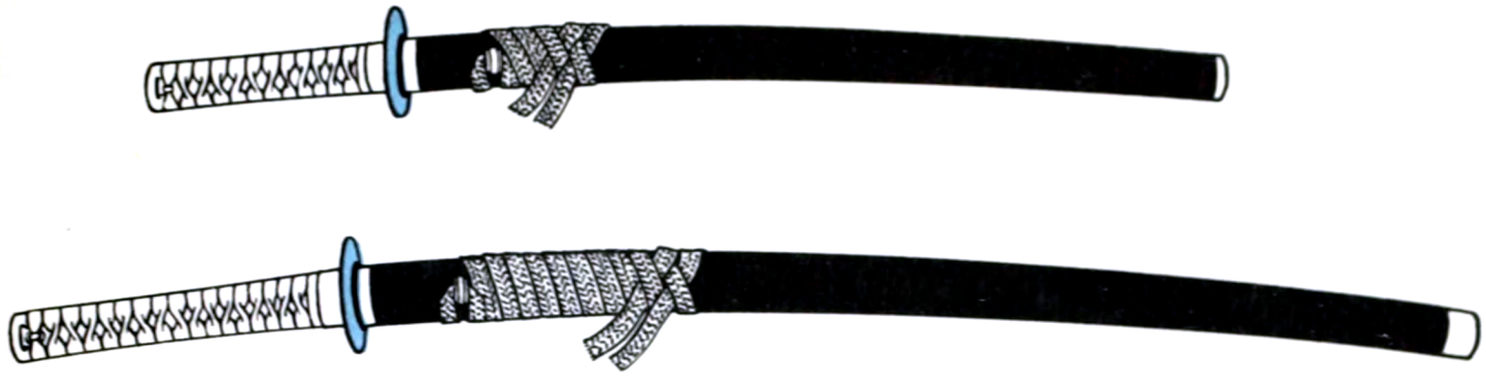
With each rank there were certain privileges but they also had to observe special rules of behaviour.

Each noble family had its own mon or badge.

A family had to be strong to hold its power against all the others. Each kept its own fighting men, and for many years the country was ruled by military dictators. The fighting men were called samurai.

Here is a samurai followed by two female attendants.

Only a samurai was allowed to wear two swords. He held a special rank. His behaviour was ruled by strict codes of loyalty, obedience and honour. He would rather take his life than break these rules.



Japanese swords were famous. They were large, but razor-sharp and supple. Sword-making was the highest-ranking of all crafts. The craftsmen were proud of their work, and signed it with their names.

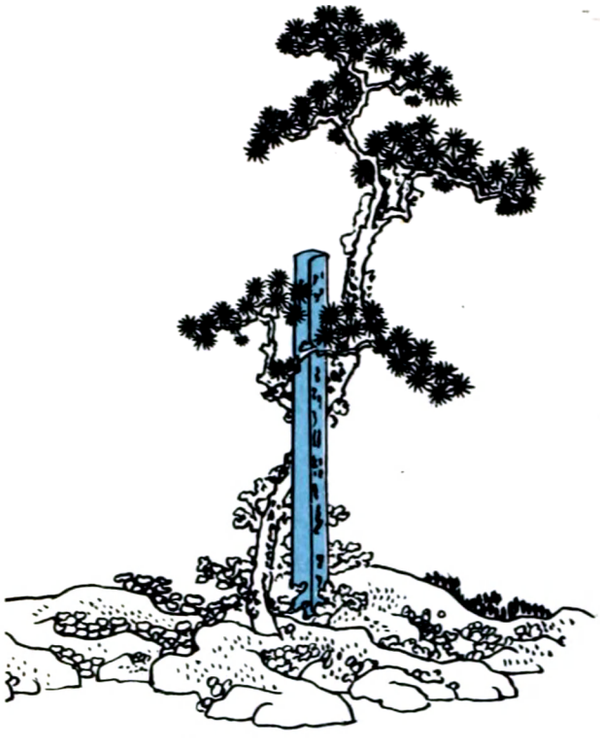
This is a guard, a small plate which came between the handle and the blade. The hole for the sword is in the centre. Sometimes there are also holes for a knife and a skewer.

Many guards show exquisite metal work. This one is decorated with chrysanthemums and daisies. The chrysanthemum, first grown in China, is a symbol of long life to the Japanese.

Artists also painted pictures
of plants and flowers,
showing their graceful shapes.

In their houses, the main decoration was often a vase of flowers,
placed in a special alcove, in a simple but careful arrangement,
which had a symbolic meaning. Today, Japanese flower arrangements,
ikebana, are admired and copied in other countries.

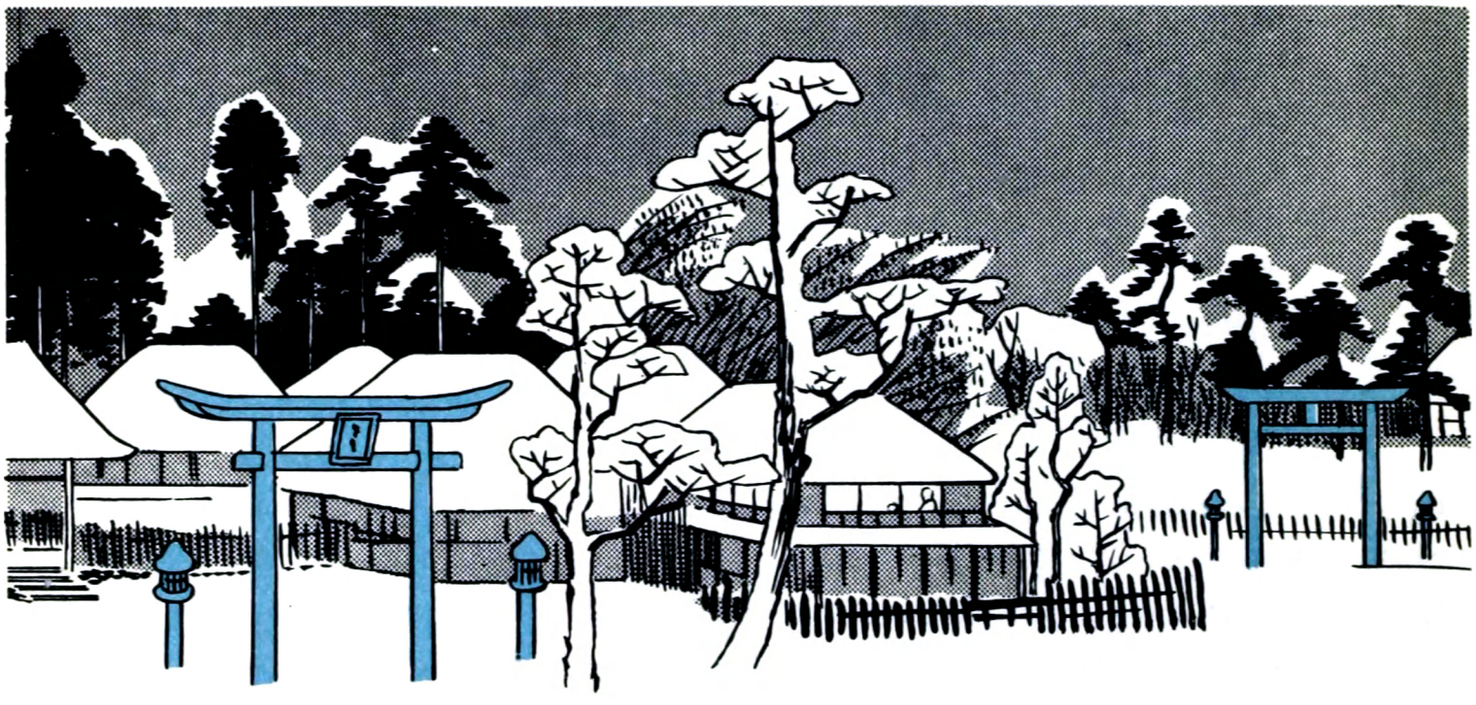
In their gardens the Japanese imitated landscapes with trees, rocks, pools, islands and bridges. They admired trees of weird shapes and often cut the stems and branches so that they would grow in a more interesting way. This garden also has a stone lantern.

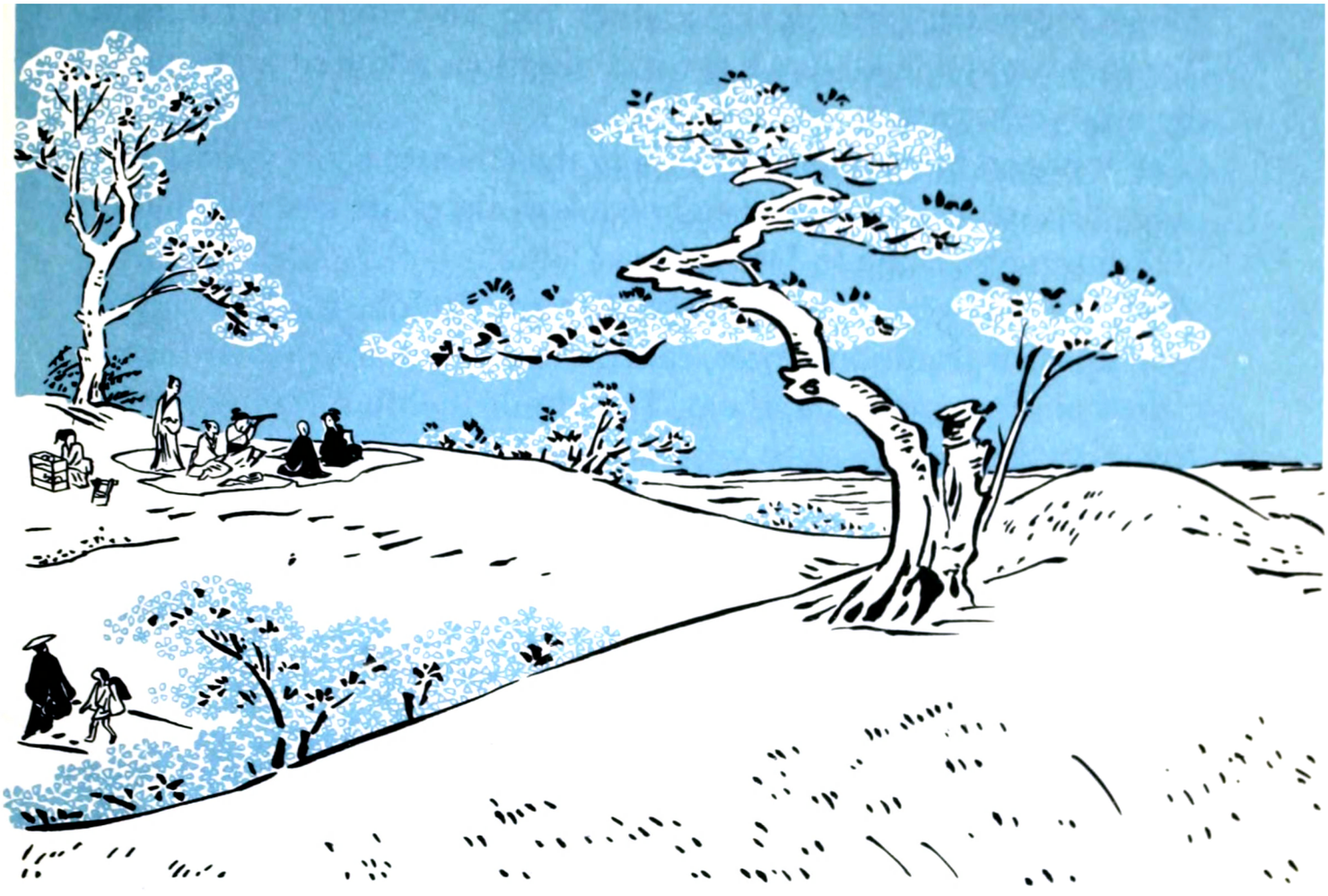


The Japanese have always been close to nature. Their early religion taught them that there were spirits everywhere, in trees, fields, rocks and streams.

Sacred places were enclosed, and people left thanks-offerings for the spirits. At first real food and pieces of cloth were offered, and later pieces of folded paper on a stick.

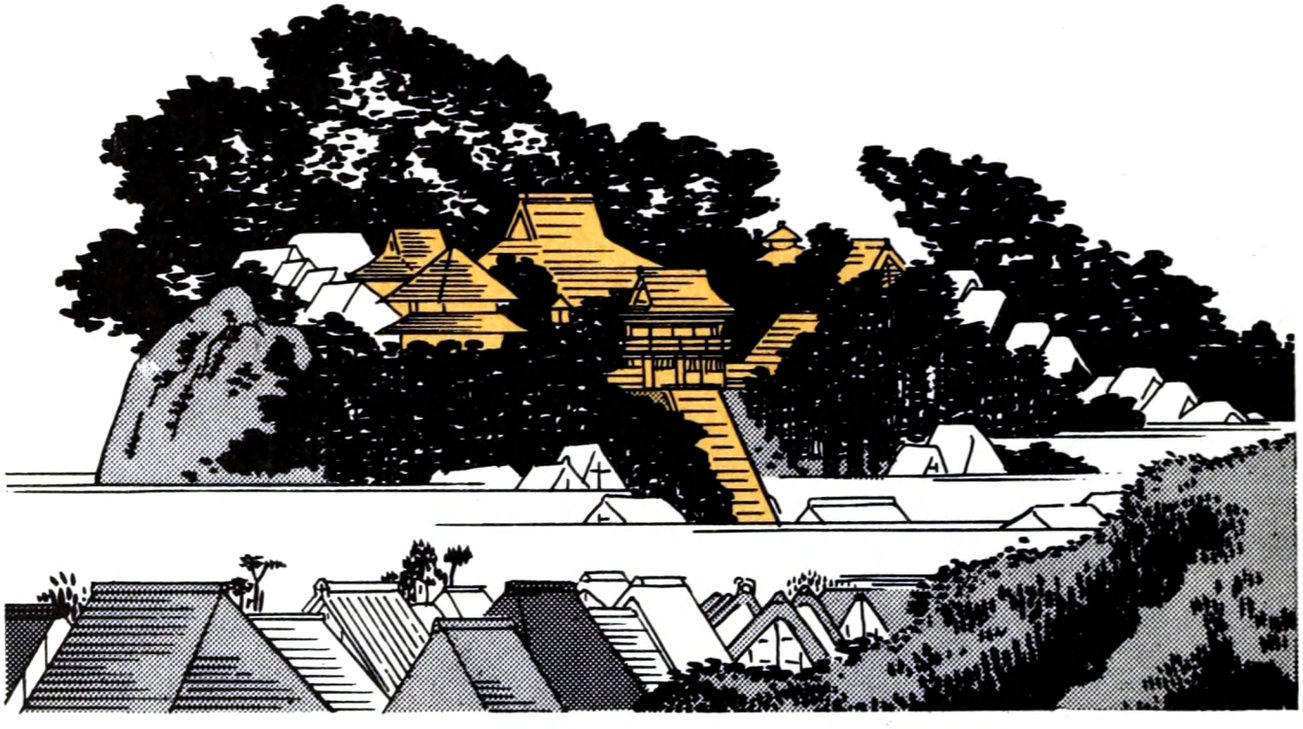
Special gateways and stone lanterns showed the way to the shrine.





The courtiers enjoyed an outing in the country. These ladies and gentlemen are having a picnic near the blossoming cherry trees, and enjoy a more distant view through a telescope.
Afterwards the ladies might write a poem about their expedition and send it to a friend, carefully written on paper chosen for its colour and texture. A messenger would deliver it, together with a branch or spray of flowers to suit the mood of the poem. He might bring back an immediate reply, composed in a similar style.

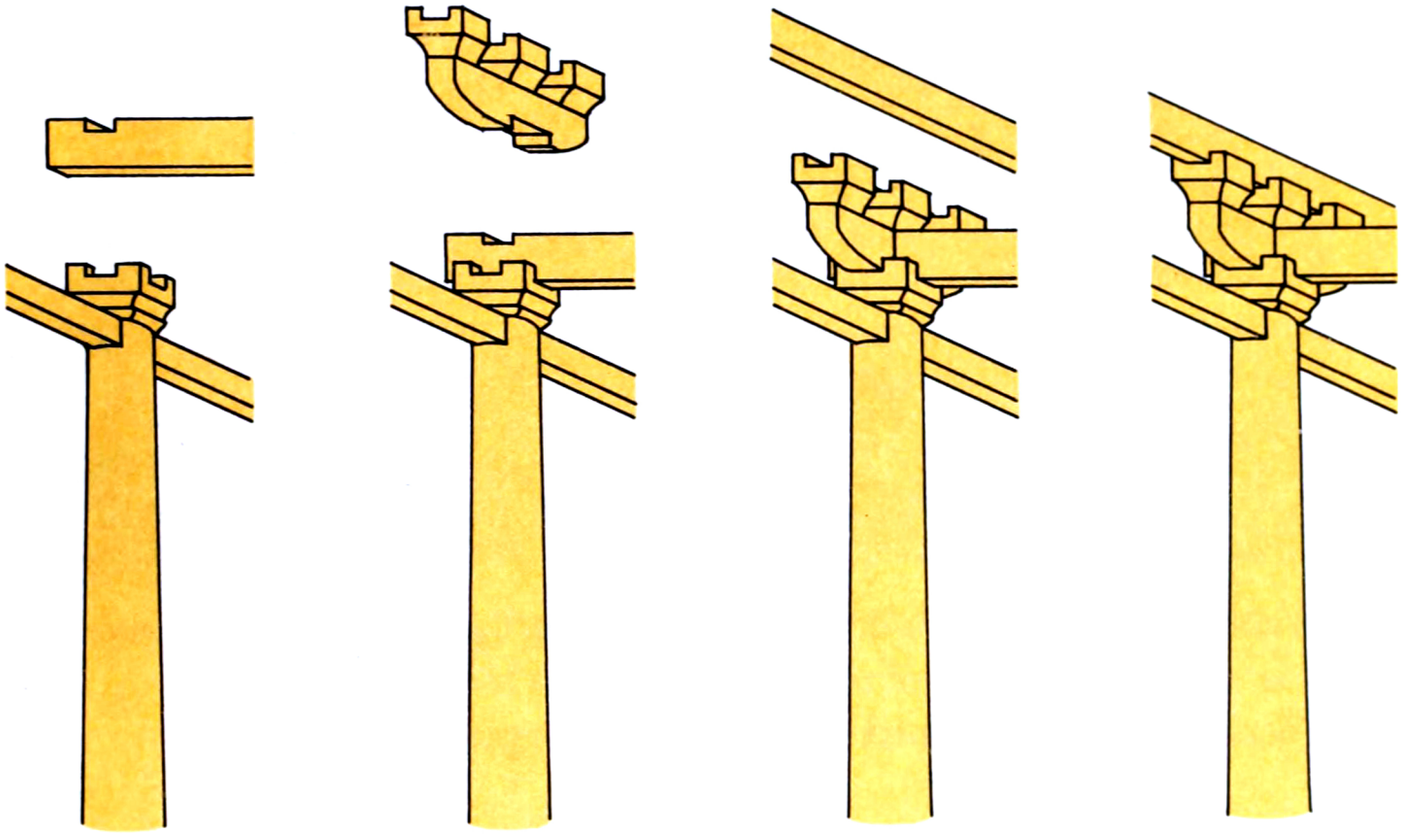
Court ceremonial, art, poetry and writing, all came from China in the early days. China was a great civilisation, admired and copied by other countries.
The Japanese used to send envoys to the Chinese court. These men told of its splendour and brought back works of art and writings.
Buddhism also came to Japan from China.
After the year 500, some emperors became Buddhists. They did not give up their traditional rites, called Shinto, but added Buddhist beliefs and ceremonies to them. They built Buddhist temples in wood. Some are more than 1,000 years old, and are among the oldest wooden buildings in the world.



Most shrines and temples have a beautiful natural setting.

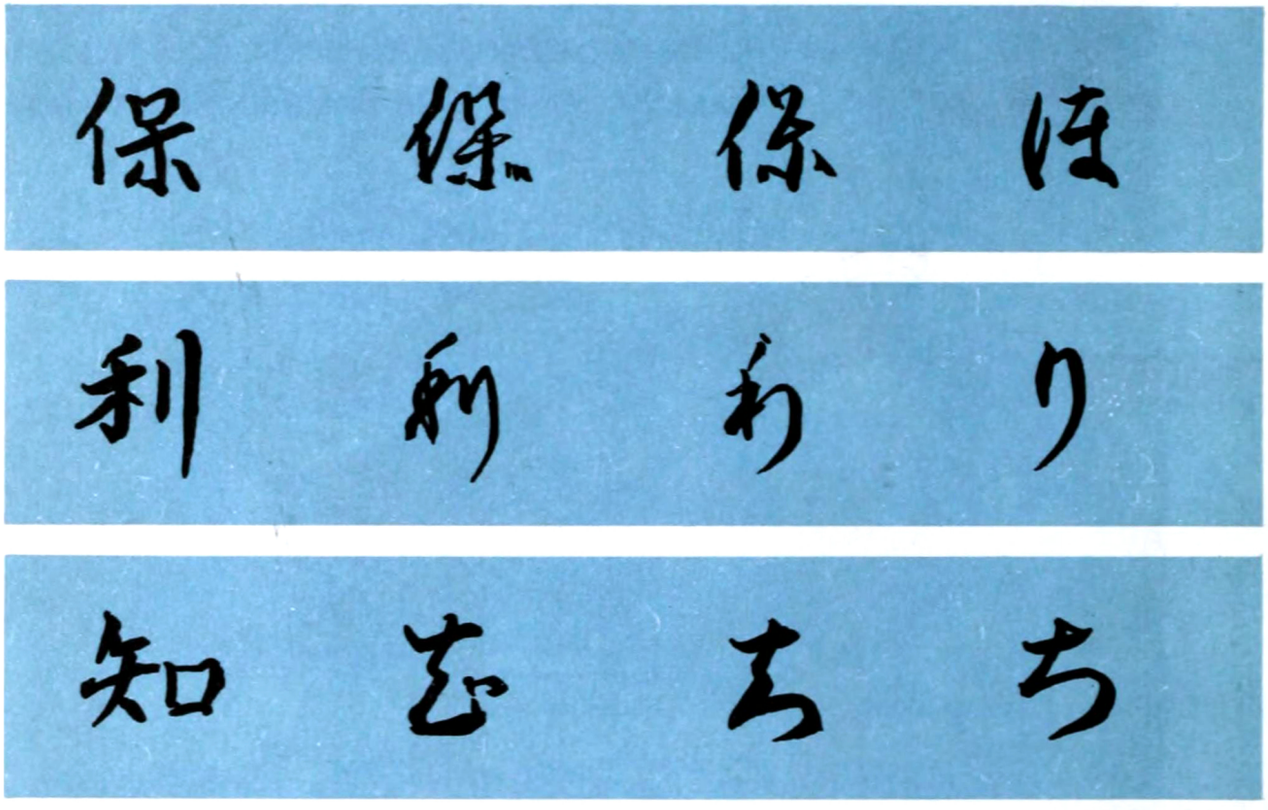
In the service of Buddhism, the Japanese created great sculptures, chiefly in wood. The Buddhists also built wooden pagodas, which had several roofs of a strange shape, one above the other. Pagodas were not used for worship. They were built to house Buddhist relics.

The builders worked like joiners. The parts of the wooden construction were made to fit exactly and to hold one another in position.

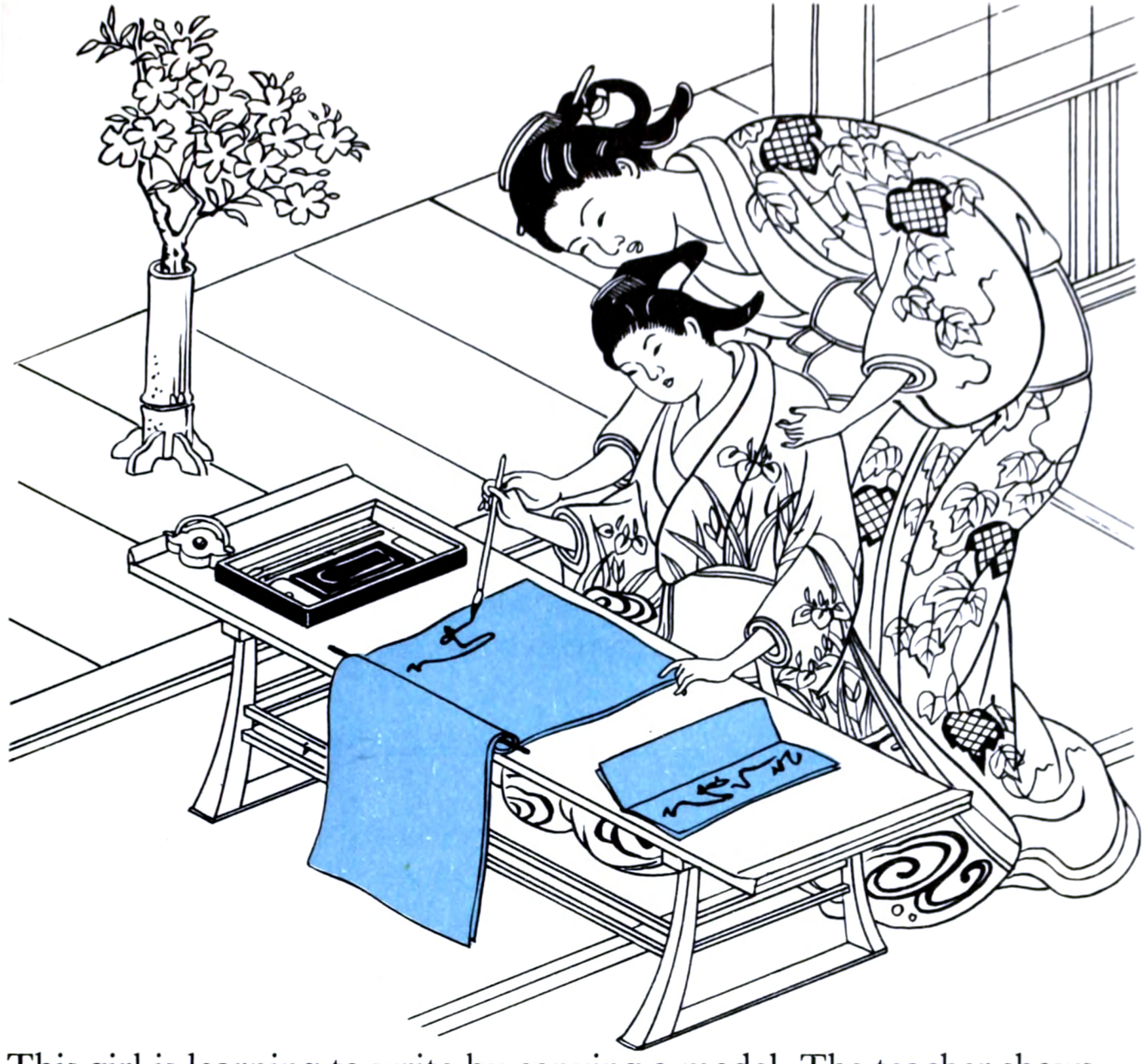


The Japanese learned to read and write from the Chinese. They copied some of the Chinese signs, but used them in a different way to suit their own language. The Chinese use signs for things and ideas, and their words are mostly of one syllable. Japanese words have several syllables, and they use a sign for each syllable.

Here are some Chinese signs, and the development of the Japanese signs from them:



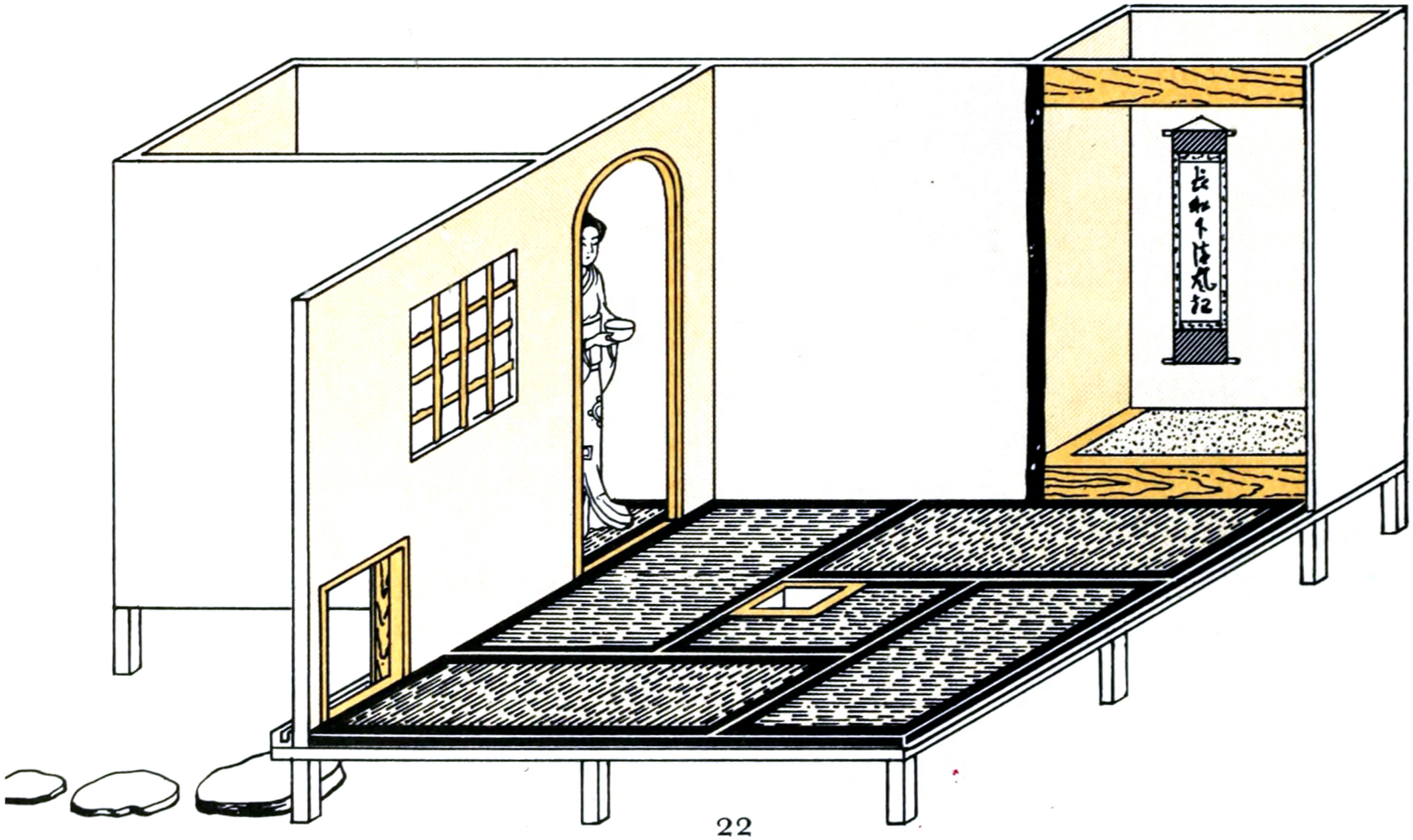
Writing was done with brush and ink on soft paper. Good writing was an art and a sign of refinement in both men and women. Poems sometimes formed part of an artist's picture.



This girl is learning to write by copying a model. The teacher shows her how to hold the brush. At her side is a box with an inkstone and a groove for the brush. Both are dressed in kimonos, the traditional Japanese robe.

About 1,000 years ago, while the Japanese men studied religious writings in Chinese, some of the court ladies wrote diaries and stories in their own language. They tell us about court life.

Later Buddhism became very popular. The Zen sect, especially, influenced people in many ways. It taught them to value wisdom and a simple style of living. When the tea plant came to Japan from southern China, the Zen Buddhists created the tea ceremony. It took place in a simple room like this with only mats to sit on. There was a hearth for the preparation of the tea, and an alcove containing a flower arrangement or other work of art. The door was sometimes so low that the men had to enter on their knees, a sign that they set aside their pride. Often this room was in a house in the garden, with a stone lantern and a basin for water near by. A small number of friends met for the tea-drinking ceremony, while they admired the work of art, recited poetry or discussed ideas.



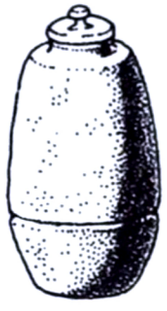
The utensils for the tea ceremony were chosen with great care.

A decorated iron kettle was used to heat the water. It does not have a spout. The rings with which to lift the kettle could be taken out.

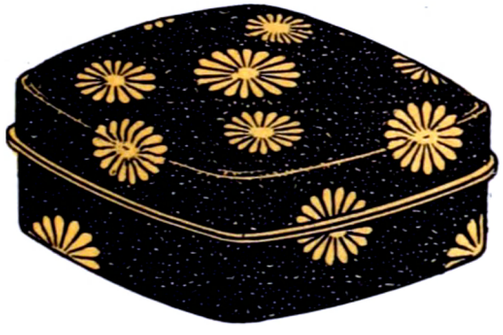
This picture shows how a firebowl could be used to heat the kettle.

The pottery used was of a coarse simplicity but of a pleasing shape. These pictures show a tea jar and bowl. The jar has an ivory lid.

Dried tea was taken from the jar and put into the bowl.
Hot water, taken from the kettle with a ladle, was mixed with it.
The bowl, held in both hands, was used for drinking.



Lacquer was greatly favoured for many household articles.

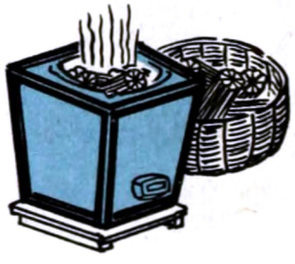


Lacquer, made from the sap of a tree, was spread on to the wooden box and polished by many skilled processes.
Designs, showing landscapes or flowers, were often worked in gold.

A garden was planned as part of the house, to be seen and enjoyed from indoors. The house was built of wood, raised off the ground on stilts. A veranda ran round the outside. The pillars of the house had grooves in them to allow blinds to be raised or lowered.

The rooms were divided by sliding screens, which could be moved to make them larger or smaller. Rooms were planned according to the number of mats that would fit them. Each mat was the same size, but they could be placed in various ways. The mats were very thick and made of straw. The bed was a soft mattress on the floor. It was kept in one of the built-in cupboards during the day.

Cooking was done over a brazier. Charcoal was burnt – this would give heat but no flame.



As the walls of Japanese houses were thin and the windows had no glass, heating was difficult. This picture shows a man and a woman warming themselves. There is a brazier under the quilt, which rests on a frame.

We see a display alcove with a picture on the wall. A screen decorated with flower designs gives protection against draughts. Most houses of the well-to-do also had a recess for reading.

When people from Europe introduced guns into Japan, wooden houses were no protection against attack. The great families built stone castles. But they lost their power as the merchants and towns became more important. The samurai lost their jobs. Homeless and poor, they began to rob the townsmen, waylaying travellers between the cities. Ordinary people were at a disadvantage, as they were not allowed to carry swords. They developed a form of defence known as jujitsu, or judo.

The ancient sport of wrestling still had a strong following. This picture shows two boys wrestling; a boy with a fan acts as referee.

The merchants liked to wear an unusual ornament, a kind of button used as a counterweight to the things they carried dangling by cords from the sash around their waists.

This carving shows how a fish-merchant has a button slipped through his waistband to balance his tobacco pouch.

Rich merchants used delightful shapes made from precious materials to hold their pipes, purses, writing cases and medicine boxes.

Here are some examples. This figure of a monkey shows the hole made for the cord. The other three are a mythical creature, a mask carver and a dancer.

In the towns a gay life began, patronised by the rich merchants. They were particularly fond of the theatre.
Dance and play had been an old tradition. In the 'No-theatre', old-style plays were still performed, in which actors wore wooden masks to show what kind of parts they were playing.

But the merchants preferred a new, lively kind of play, 'kabuki', which told a story or showed how men had to choose between love and duty. As women and boys were not allowed to act, the men took women's parts. They had to study carefully to imitate women, and became very good actors.

This picture shows an actor in a woman's part.

Here is another actor dressing for a part.

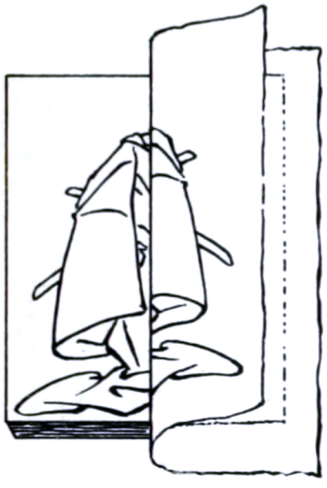
The ordinary people bought pictures of famous actors and copied their fashions.

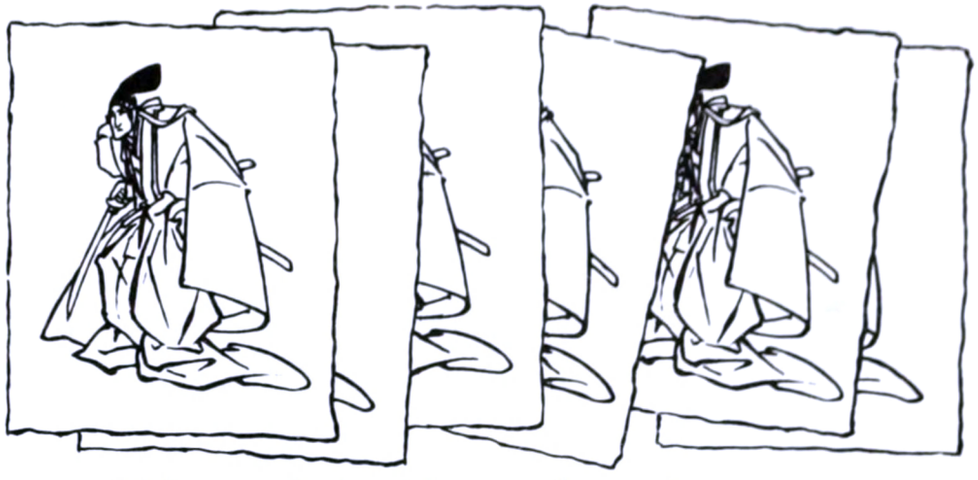
To supply enough pictures, prints were made from wood blocks.

An artist prepared an original drawing with black ink on very thin paper.

A craftsman pasted it face down to a smooth block of wood. With a sharp knife he cut through the paper into the wood, following each line carefully. The background was chipped out with a chisel and mallet. Then the printer put his black printing ink on the raised surface of the wood, placed a piece of paper on top, and rubbed the back of the paper with a pad.

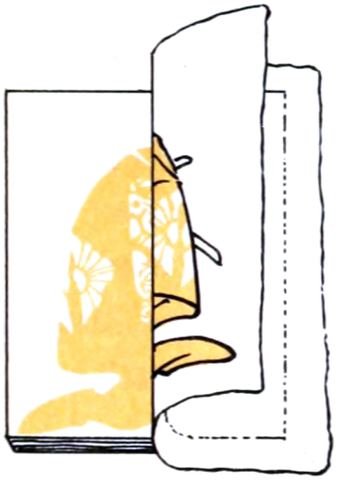
When he peeled off the paper, the design was transferred on to it.





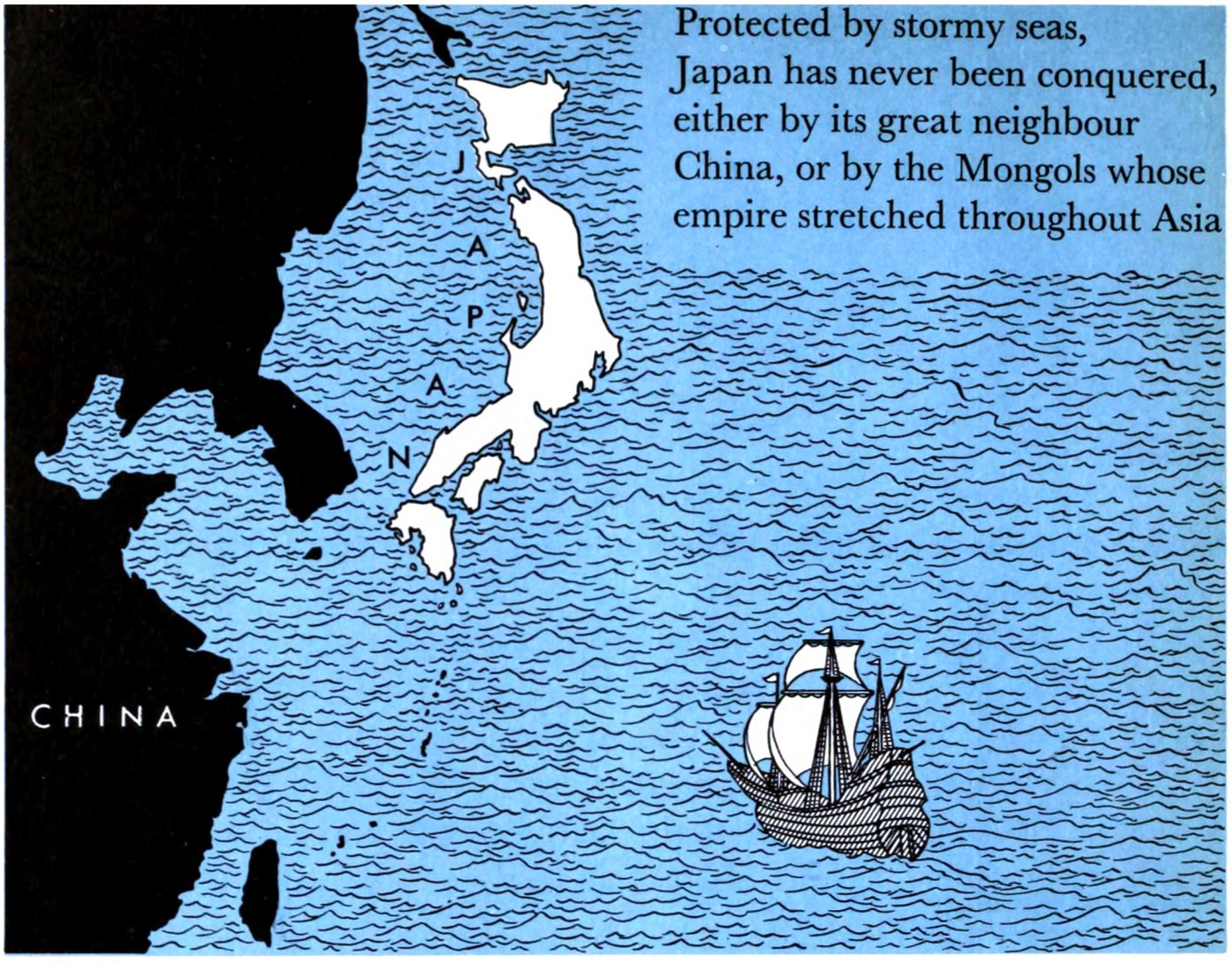
A great number of prints could be made in this way from the same block.

To colour part of a print, another wood block was cut. Its raised surface was covered with the chosen colour, and then a black and white print, face down, was put on the new block in exactly the right place and rubbed.
Several colours could be added in the same way.



Today museums and libraries all over the world collect these Japanese colour prints.

Many of the pictures in this book are copied from them.



About the time when Columbus landed in America, the Portuguese sailed around the world and reached Japan. Soon after, Dutch ships arrived. The rulers allowed them to trade for some time. Then, upset by these foreigners who were interfering in Japanese affairs, they closed Japan to the outside world. This is why the life of 'Old Japan' continued unchanged for so long. When, little more than a century ago, the isolation ended, Japan quickly learned modern ways.